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NATION

An Oily Mess

Workers race to clean up a 168,000-gallon oil spill in a major Texas waterway

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PETTY OFFICER 3RD CLASS MANDA M. EMORY/US COAST GUARD—AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A vessel sits in oily water at the crash site near Houston, Texas.

Cleanup crews are rushing to clean up after an oil spill in Texas's busy Houston Ship Channel. On Saturday, a barge carrying about 900,000 gallons of heavy oil collided with a ship and leaked as much as 168,000 gallons of its cargo into the waterway.

Black tar-like globs and a dark line of sticky oil have spread to the shoreline of Texas. On the day after the spill, oil had already spread 12 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Captain Brian Penoyer, commander of the Coast Guard at Houston-Galveston, said currents, tides, and wind were scattering the spill. "Containment was never a possibility in this case," he said. "This is a significant spill."

More than 380 people have been working to remove the oil and protect animals in the area. On Monday, the Coast Guard said it planned on sending 24 ships to skim the oil from the water. But scientists and environmentalists worry about the damage the slick could have on wildlife.

Bad Timing for Birds

Environmental groups said the spill happened at a very bad time for birds. The channel in Texas City has an important shorebird habitat. Just to the east of the spill is a bird sanctuary that attracts 50,000 to 70,000 shorebirds each year. "The timing really couldn't be much worse since we're approaching the peak shorebird migration season," said Richard Gibbons, conservation director of the Houston Audubon Society.



MELISSA PHILLIP—HOUSTON CHRONICLE/AP
Responders are working to protect local birds from oil spreading in the water.

As of Sunday afternoon, fewer than 10 oiled birds had been found and moved to a wildlife rehabilitation center, according to the Coast Guard. The Texas General Land Office also set up a bird trailer to quickly treat sick birds found in the area.

Clean-Up Efforts



The Houston Ship Channel is a busy waterway. On Monday, it was shut down for the third day in a row, causing a traffic jam on the water. As many as 60 vessels were backed up, both trying to get in and get out. Two cruise ships were allowed



SMILEY N. POOL—HOUSTON CHRONICLE/AP
Workers use floating barriers, called oil containment booms, to prevent oil from spreading.

through. But some cruise ships are still delayed, stranding passengers. The Coast Guard said there is no set time for the port to reopen.

In the meantime, the barge that caused the slick has been moved to a shipyard to prevent more oil from spilling, according to a government statement. Kirby Inland

Marine Corporation owns the barge. The company's Executive Vice President Jim Guidry said they would take responsibility for the costs. "We're very concerned. We're focused on cleaning up," he said.

The Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board are still investigating what happened. Penoyer, of the Coast Guard, said uncovering all the facts will take time because it is a complex situation. In a press release on Sunday, Texas Governor Rick Perry said the state of Texas will continue to work to make sure the spill is cleaned up. "We are thankful to the responders and personnel who are working diligently to respond to this situation," he stated.